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Native american stringed musical instruments.

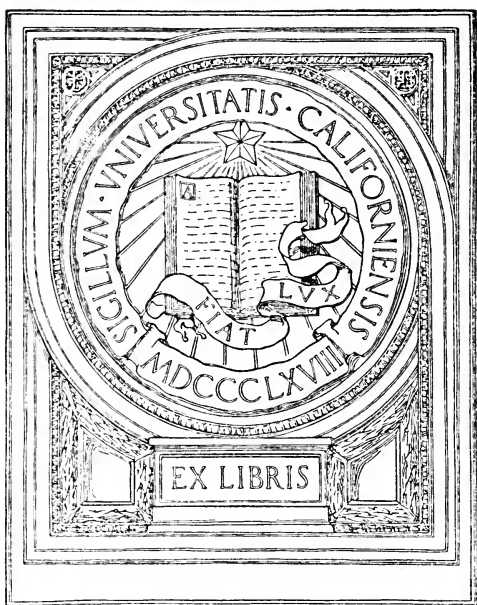
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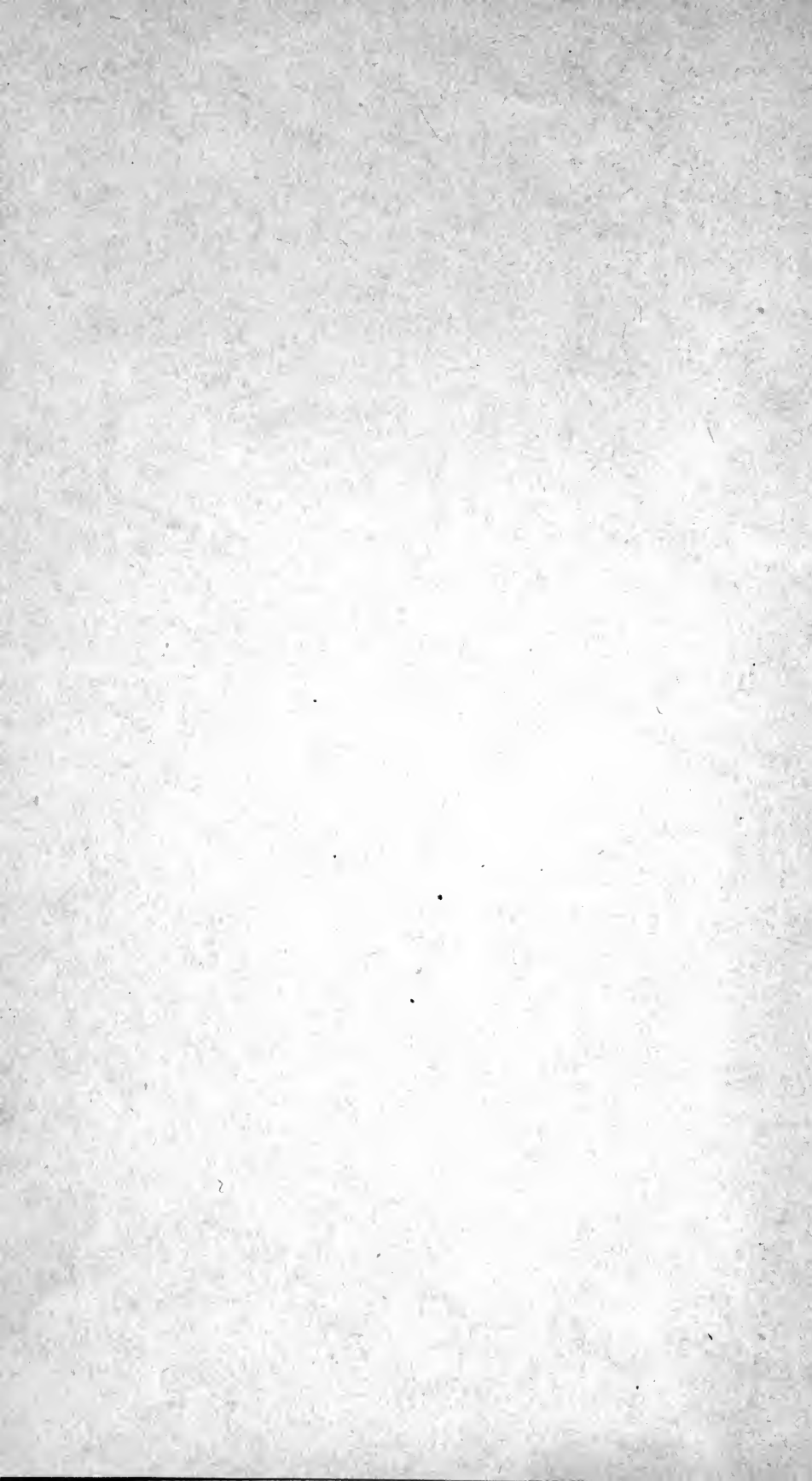
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Native American Stringed Musical Instruments.

by

Daniel G. Brinton, M. D.



There appears to be no other foundation for the opinion advanced by Catlin that the Mandans once lived on the Ohio, than their somewhat advanced culture, the character of their dwellings, and the fact that they were agriculturists. This opinion probably arose in some way out of a supposed connection between them and the builders of the mounds of Ohio. It is more probable they were people formerly known in north-western Wisconsin as the "Ground-House Indians," of whom we have but a dim, though seemingly strictly reliable tradition. They were probably driven southward as far as the mouth of the Missouri river, where they began the cultivation of maize, then, like other cognate tribes, moved westward up the Missouri river.

NATIVE AMERICAN STRINGED MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.

BY DANIEL G. BRINTON, M. D.

Musical instruments are of three classes, the first and earliest being where the sound is produced by percussion, as a drum or gong; the second includes wind-instruments, as flutes and conches; and the third and highest embraces the various forms of stringed instruments, where a vibrating cord develops the musical note.

It is generally stated that the American Indians at the time of the discovery did not use anywhere on the continent a stringed instrument. I have found, however, four examples which seem to controvert this, and I give them in the hope that readers of the *THE ANTIQUARIAN* will be able to add to their number.

The first is the *Quijongo* of Central America. This is a monochord, made by fastening a wooden bow with a stretched cord, over the mouth of a gourd or jar which serves as a resonator. The bow is usually a hollow reed about five feet long, and the resonator is attached at one-third the distance from one end. The string is then bent down and fastened to the mouth of the jar. The notes are produced by striking the two sections of the string with a light stick, and at the same time the opening of the jar is more or less closed by the palm of the hand, thus producing a variety in the notes.

I have given a cut of this instrument in the introduction to the *Comedy Ballet of Gueguence*, p. xxxvi (Philadelphia,

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1883). Professor J. F. Ferraz, in his work, *Nahuatlismos de Costa Rica*, p. 106, says the name is from the Nahuatl or Aztec language, but its exact derivation is unknown.

The Apache Indians in some of their ceremonies made use of a small stringed instrument, of one cord, known as the "Apache fiddle." Several specimens are now in the museum at the University of Pennsylvania. The resonator is a hollow reed about a foot in length, over which is stretched a strand composed of six or eight horse-hairs. The strand is at one end, wrapped around a movable cross-bar, which allows it to be tightened at will. The cord is sounded by means of a bow with a horse-hair string. There is some doubt whether this is a genuine aboriginal invention. The specimens were obtained by Captains Bourke and McCauley of the United States army. The former does not refer to it in his "Medicine Men of the Apaches."

The third example is mentioned by James Adair in his *History of the American Indians*, p. 175. He relates that in 1746 he was among the "Mississippi-Natchee" Indians, and witnessed a performance "on one of their old sacred musical instruments." He described it as "about five feet long and a foot wide on the head part of the board, with eight strings made out of the sinews of a large buffalo." The player "held the instrument between his feet, and along side of his chin, took one end of the bow, while a lusty fellow held the other. By sweating labor they scraped out such harsh sounds as might have been sufficient to drive out the devil, if he lay in the house."

The fourth is a specimen in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. It is a reed about five feet long, with a jar fastened at the middle point, above which is a bridge. To this are attached four strings of different lengths. This is marked as from the Upper Purus River, Brazil, "Apurman Indians." No such tribe and no such instrument are mentioned by Martins, Markham, Ehrenreich, Von den Steiner or Polak, so I can add nothing to the information on the label.

It is possible that in all these cases the instruments were borrowed with modifications from the whites or negroes; but there is sufficient probability that they were aboriginal American inventions to make their further study desirable.

The stringed instrument sometimes found in Central America, made by stretching cords over the concave carapace of an armadillo or turtle, must be modern, as it has no native name in either Maya or Nahuatl; as is undoubtedly the *Yakatat*, or native fiddle of Alaska.

